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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: EMBASSY HOSTS ROUNDTABLE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT  
ROLLOUT

REF: A. 07 TASHKENT 451  
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 307  
[1](#)C. 07 TASHKENT 2132  
[1](#)D. TASHKENT 281  
[1](#)E. TASHKENT 300

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On March 13, the Embassy hosted the rollout of the 2007 U.S. State Department's Human Rights Report. In stark contrast to last year's rollout, when several invitees were detained and harassed (ref A), this year's event went forward without any interference from the government. All of the Embassy's invited human rights contacts attended and none of them complained of any form of harassment, despite the negative reaction to the Human Rights Report the Ambassador received on March 12 from Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov, who characterized it as a "unfriendly act" and "counterproductive" (ref B). The rollout itself took the form of a roundtable, and provided activists from different (and often sparring) human rights groups a rare opportunity to sit down together and exchange views. The major topic of discussion during the roundtable was whether the West should impose sanctions against the Karimov regime and the degree to which it should pursue increased engagement. The views expressed by the human rights activists were mixed, with some calling for imposing stronger sanctions, while others argued that increased dialogue with the government was more likely to bring about human rights progress. In the end, it was clear that few of the activists in attendance favored increasing the government's isolation, recognizing this as counterproductive, and instead favored greater engagement with the West. End summary.

NO DISRUPTION AT THIS YEAR'S ROLLOUT  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) On March 13, the Embassy hosted the rollout of the 2007 U.S. State Department's Human Rights Report. In stark contrast to last year's rollout, when several invitees were detained and harassed (ref A), this year's event went forward without any interference from the government. All of the Embassy's invited human rights contacts attended and none of

them complained of any form of harassment, despite the negative reaction to the Human Rights Report the Ambassador received on March 12 from Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov, who characterized it as a "an unfriendly act" and "counterproductive" (ref B). The rollout was the second major human rights related-event that the Embassy has been able to host without government interference since the Human Rights Day roundtable and reception in December (ref C).

#### ACTIVISTS EXPRESS DIVERGENT VIEWS ON SANCTIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

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13. (C) The rollout itself took the form of a roundtable, and provided activists from different (and often sparring) human rights group a rare opportunity to sit down together and exchange views. Fifteen representatives of human rights organizations and minority religious groups participated in the roundtable. In addition, the event was attended by diplomats and local staff from the British, German, French, and Swiss Embassies in Tashkent; representatives from non-governmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Istiqbolli Avlod, a local anti-trafficking group; and local stringers from Ferghana.ru, the Associated Press, and Reuters. In his opening remarks, the Ambassador emphasized that the report only covered events occurring in calendar year 2007, and noted that the government had taken "small but significant" steps in improving its human rights records since January, including releasing a number of political prisoners.

14. (C) The major topic of discussion during the roundtable was whether the human rights activists supported the imposition of sanctions against the Karimov regime and the degree to which they felt the West should pursue greater

dialogue with the regime (Note: The European Union will meet again in April to consider whether to reinstate visa sanctions on Uzbekistan, which were suspended for six months in October 2007. The U.S. may also face a decision on visa prohibitions shortly afterwards, based on legislation the President signed in December 2007. End note.) The views expressed by the human rights groups were mixed. Independent Initiative Group of Human Rights Activists Chair Surat Ikramov dismissed the recent amnesty and release of six political prisoners, noting that the government had released 3 political prisoners last year only to arrest several more later in the year (Comment: While Ikramov's observation is accurate for 2007, for the record, no human rights activists have yet been arrested since the most recent round of amnesties began in January. End note.) He further argued that as the "most powerful" nations on Earth, the United States and European Union states had the power to affect positive change on human rights in Uzbekistan through isolating the Karimov regime.

15. (C) On the other hand, Rapid Reaction Group member Abdusalom Ergashev argued that the West already attempted to isolate the Karimov regime after the 2005 Andijon events, and this isolation only resulted in the regime having a freer hand to crack down on human rights activists. Rapid Reaction Group member Shukhrat Ganiev observed that the situation for human rights activists has improved in recent months, for example, with the reopening of Human Rights Watch, and argued that "a small window of opportunity for dialogue" was opening now that should be seized upon. Mothers Against the Death Penalty and Torture Chair Tamara Chikunovna, citing her own organization's ultimately successful lobbying against the death penalty in Uzbekistan (which was formally abolished in January), argued that human rights progress can only be achieved through dialogue and attempting to achieve mutual understanding with the government.

#### DISAGREEMENTS CARRIED OVER ONTO INDEPENDENT WEBSITES

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16. (U) Further illustrating the disagreement among human rights activists are contradicting articles that have appeared recently on independent websites. For example, on

March 11, Ferghana.ru ran a story entitled "Uzbek Opposition Welcomes Rapprochement with the West," covering a recent Birlik opposition party's meeting in the Ferghana Valley city of Kokand. However, on March 12, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) ran a story entitled "Activists Fear NATO Return to Uzbekistan," quoting an unnamed human rights activist as stating that any rapprochement between the Uzbeks and the West on security issues would come at the cost of human rights.

#### INFORMAL STRAW POLL OF ACTIVISTS

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¶17. (C) To better gauge the activists' views on sanctions and engagement, the Ambassador conducted an informal, impromptu straw poll. First, the Ambassador asked how many of the activists believed that imposing sanctions would lead to a cutoff in dialogue between the West and the government, and seven activists answered yes, while six answered no. Afterwards, the Ambassador asked how many of the activists would still support sanctions if it resulted in a cutoff in dialogue, and ten of the activists answered no, while only four of them answered yes.

#### HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH TAKES POSITION ON EU SANCTIONS

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¶18. (SBU) During the discussion on sanctions, Human Rights Watch (HRW) Country Director Igor Vorontsov (who is still awaiting accreditation) observed that the issue has been much discussed in his organization. He stated that HRW's position at this time is that the EU should not lift sanctions, as this was not merited so far by actions on the ground, but HRW also believed that the EU should also not impose new, tougher

sanctions. Instead, Vorontsov said that HRW's position was that the suspension of EU sanctions should be extended for another three months beyond April, rather than for another six months.

#### EZGULIK ALSO PRESENTS ITS OWN REPORT AT ROLLOUT

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¶19. (SBU) Ezgulik, one of the only registered human rights groups in Uzbekistan, also presented its own annual report during the Human Rights Report rollout at the Embassy. In addition to English and Russian copies of the 2007 State Department Human Rights Report, the Embassy also made copies of Ezgulik's report available to participants. During her brief remarks, Ezgulik Chair (and opposition Birlik party leader) Vasila Inoyatova stated that her organization looked favorably upon increased engagement between the government and the West, which she believed was likely to result in further progress on human rights.

¶10. (U) In its 35-page report, Ezgulik more or less summarizes its reporting and activities for the past year. The report covers a wide range of topics, including limitations on the activity of non-governmental organizations, harassment of journalists and human rights activists, abuse of prisoners, the use of child labor in the annual cotton harvest, and irregularities during the most recent Presidential election in December. The report's main recommendations include that the government should create a special department to oversee the fulfillment of the recommendations from the United Nations Committee Against Torture's most recent meeting on Uzbekistan last November, and that the government should also create a special department to oversee the protection of children's rights.

¶11. (U) The Ezgulik report also notes that the government has been reluctant to respond to inquiries from human rights group. According to the report, Ezgulik sent 85 letters to government bodies requesting additional information or explanation on human rights cases, and that it received six replies from the Prosecutor General Office (out of 21 letters sent) and six replies from the Ministry of Justice (out of nine letters sent.) In addition, Ezgulik did not receive any

reply letters the whole year from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Security Service, Parliament, the Presidential Apparat, and the Prison Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (GUIN). The report was also critical of the Human Rights Ombudsman's office, which it depicted as ineffective.

#### URLAYEVA RAISES DISRUPTION OF PUBLIC PROTEST

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¶12. (SBU) During the rollout, Human Rights Alliance member Elena Urlayeva reported that a group of women had disrupted a protest on March 13 led by Alliance members calling for the release of political prisoners (Note: Alliance members have been holding the picket every Thursday since December 2007 in front of the General Prosecutor's Office in Tashkent. It is usually attended by the same group of eight to ten protestors. End note.) She said that the women, whom she described as "gypsies," had assaulted the protestors with chains, sending two of them to the hospital.

¶13. (SBU) On March 14, poloff discussed the disruption of the protest further with Alliance member Aktam Shaymardanov (who, unlike Urlayeva, was actually present at the protest when it was disrupted.) Shaymardanov said that approximately 35 protests participated in the picket on March 13, which was much larger than usual and included human rights activists that had traveled from Samarkand and Jizzakh provinces. He said that protest was disrupted by approximately twenty women and children who began to harass the protestors and push them around. Shaymardanov said that the women and children ultimately failed to break up the protest and that the Alliance planned to hold another protest next week as usual. Unlike Urlayeva, he did not report that the women used chains

to hit the protestors. He also said that two individuals were treated after the incident for minor injuries. Though the protestors at the picket had been outnumbered by police in previous weeks, Shaymardanov said that only one police officer was visible on March 13 and did not attempt to intervene during the disturbance.

#### PRESS COVERAGE OF ROLLOUT

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¶14. (U) The rollout of the human rights report was reported in a March 13 Reuters story entitled "U.S. Praises Uzbekistan for Rights Improvement." The article focused on the Ambassador's recognition in his opening remarks of Uzbekistan's "small but significant" steps to improve human rights since January. The same article also noted that the International Committee of the Red Cross resumed prison visits in Uzbekistan after more than three years of negotiation with the government (septel).

#### HAMROEV REPORTS LESS HARRASSMENT FOLLOWING AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO JIZZAKH

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¶15. (C) After the formal discussion at the roundtable, participants continued informal discussions with one another. Poloff had an opportunity to talk at length with Jizzakh-based activist Bakhtiyor Hamroev, who reported that harassment of human rights activists in his province had noticeably decreased since the Ambassador's visit on February 29. During his visit, the Ambassador met with Hamroev in the company of a Jizzakh deputy hokim (governor) and another human rights activist, Saida Kurbanova, who reported being harassed by authorities for helping to organize a public protest, and that unknown individuals had stolen a bag from her which contained her and her son's passports (ref D). Hamroev told poloff on March 13 that the day after the Ambassador's trip to Jizzakh, police returned the missing passports to Kurbanova, explaining that they were found on the side of a road. He also said that she was no longer being harassed by authorities. Hamroev also reported that his son, who was amnestied and released from prison in February, has not suffered harassment since his release.

However, Hamroev noted that his son is still on parole and is obliged to meet with the police once a month, and he remained concerned that authorities could decide to throw his son back into prison at any moment.

#### EX-HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH STAFFER GETS EXIT VISA

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¶16. (C) In another positive development, former Human Rights Watch staffer Umida Niyazova, whose suspended sentence was lifted after she was amnestied in February, told poloff on March 14 that she was granted an exit visa, to her own surprise (Comment: In the past, the Uzbeks have routinely denied granting exit visas to human rights activists. Just last week, the Ambassador sat down with a human rights lawyer who has been waiting three years for an exit visa, ref E. End comment.) She planned to apply soon for an EU Schengen visa to visit her husband in Prague, who works at Radio Free Europe. However, her passport only has one free page left in it, she will need to apply for a new passport after she returns. Niyazova also expressed interest in trying to pursue some type of human rights-related internship, either in Europe or the United States. She said she was not interested in obtaining political asylum, as she still intended to return to Uzbekistan to continue her human rights work. She also noted talking to Human Rights Watch about possibly working for them again.

#### COMMENT

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¶17. (C) The straw poll results demonstrate that few of the activists in attendance supported completely isolating the Uzbek government. Instead, most of the activists in

attendance supported the West in pursuing greater dialogue with the Karimov regime, whether they supported sanctions or not. Furthermore, we have observed that some of the human rights activists calling for sanctions have unrealistic expectations about the ability of the United States and the European Union to affect government policies through tools like sanctions and fail to comprehend that sanctions could well result in a breakdown in engagement. Perhaps the best illustration of this at the roundtable were the remarks of Human Rights Alliance member Elena Uralayeva, who said that the West would "somehow find a way" to both impose sanctions and increase dialogue with the government at the same time. While we recognize that the threat of sanctions may have prompted the government to take some of the "small but significant" steps that it has made since January, at this point, we believe that more sustainable progress on human rights could be made through increased engagement with the government.

HANSON